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ABSTRACT

Because family literacy programs' success depends on strong relationships between family literacy programs and Head Start partners, a series of focus groups were convened to identify ways of strengthening cooperation between Pennsylvania's family literacy and Head Start programs. The six focus groups sites represented a mix of Pennsylvania's geographic regions, rural and urban sites, and Act 143 and Even Start programs. One site opted to hold separate focus groups for Head Start and family literacy staff. The Head Start and family literacy staff at the other five sites elected to have their focus groups together. Four of the programs were co-located, and most participating families were co-enrolled in both programs. All five programs made reciprocal referrals and provided cross training and/or co-training. In most cases, Head Start personnel provided ideas for grant proposals, and family literacy personnel took the lead in preparing the proposals. All five programs stated that staff from both program components had trusted each other from the outset and shared the same philosophies. At five sites, staff conducted their planning together. Three sites included personnel from both program components on advisory boards, held joint staffing meetings, and shared assessment results and evaluations. (MN)

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Pennsylvania Head Start—Family Literacy
Focus Group Meeting Report
2002

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July 2002

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Background

In nearly 90% of Pennsylvania's family literacy programs (federally funded Even Start and State-funded Act 143), the early childhood education component is provided by Head Start. To ensure quality early childhood education, it is critical that the family literacy and Head Start partners establish strong relationships, aligned in best practice for assessment, instruction, curriculum, and evaluation. Collaboration is key to success, but sometimes elusive. At the suggestion of the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Head Start Association, a small group of family literacy and Head Start key personnel convened in October 2001 to discuss the statewide issue of Head Start and family literacy as partners. The ACF Memorandum on Head Start policy (Recommended Action Steps) provided foundation for the meeting. Mandates are similar, however there are several differences between the two partners. Family literacy, by law, is required to collaborate with other providers in the community and provide linkages to support families. Furthermore, it deals with families with children up to third grade. Adult education is a key component of family literacy and not necessarily in Head Start. And, family literacy is year-round, while Head Start is not required to be. Strong partnerships recognize these differences as singular strengths where each program can support the other, not supplant. At the end of the meeting the group decided to conduct several regional focus groups with family literacy and Head Start partnerships that demonstrate exemplary practice in collaboration.

To identify the sites, Kathy Yorkievitz, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Head Start Association, and Donald Paquette, Pennsylvania's Even Start Coordinator, jointly identified thirteen partnerships that they believed exemplified best practice in collaboration. From the thirteen sites, four were selected. An effort was made to establish a balance in terms of geography, rural/urban, and Act 143/ Even Start programs. The family literacy coordinators were contacted and invited to participate in the focus groups. They then contacted their Head Start partners to determine their interest and set the schedule. One program cancelled due to administrative changes. Two additional programs were added as part of an Even Start local evaluation. While both Head Start and family literacy staff participated, the focus group was conducted by only the ISAL staff member, using exactly the same questions and protocol. In all, five sites were scheduled: Jefferson-Clarion Head-Start (Even Start), Altoona Area School District (Act 143), Luzerne County Community College (Act 143), and the Fulton County and Juniata County family literacy sites of the TIU11 grantee (Even Start).

Questions for the focus group were drafted by an ISAL staff member who sent them to the Head Start co-facilitator and to several family literacy and early childhood education experts for feedback. Those suggestions were integrated into the questions, and Penn State's Office for Research Protection approved the protocol. Questions and informed consent forms were distributed to the sites ahead of time. The intent was for both the Head Start and the ISAL facilitators to conduct the focus groups separately—one for Head Start staff and one for family literacy staff. This was accomplished at only one site. The other sites articulated that because of their strong partnerships, they preferred to be together for the focus groups.

In March and April 2002, staff from Head Start technical assistance centers (Connie Shafer and Jeff Koppel) and from the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy (Drucie Weirauch and Beth Grinder) conducted focus groups with Family Literacy programs and their Head Start partners. The purpose of the focus groups was to investigate processes, procedures and local policies for best practice in collaboration, which will inform the field.

Questions

1. Please describe how you currently work together (number and location of sites; co-enrolled families, intake procedure, referral procedure, home-based or center-based program, etc.)
2. How did the partnership develop? (Defining roles and responsibilities, integration of components, shared resources, budget, joint staff meetings and trainings, etc.)
3. To what extent did Head Start collaborate in writing the proposal?
4. What do you do to enhance trust?
5. To what extent do you work together in program planning? Instructional planning? Implementation? Assessment and evaluation?
6. What problems have you encountered? How were they resolved?
7. What system do you have in place to make the partnership work better?
8. What is gained by each partner from the other? What is the "value added" of partnering?

Results

Program and Partnership Description

The first question entailed a number of sub-questions. In four of the five programs, the partners shared the same site. This, all said, is critical to success. The majority of families in all programs were co-enrolled in Head Start. All programs reciprocate with referrals and one had formalized this with a "Family Partnership Agreement." Cross-training and co-training occur. While all of the programs were primarily center-based, one program offered most of its ABE education at the participants' homes.

Program Description	
Co-located	4
Majority of families co-enrolled	4
Reciprocal Referrals	5
Cross- and/or Co-training	5

Interesting points were made by all partners. In one program, Head Start teachers integrate adult and parenting education into the early childhood curriculum with a featured author of the month. In parenting education, the adults developed a science fair with the exhibits placed in the Head Start hallway. As children examined the displays, they benefited by seeing their parents' work. In another strong program, the family literacy program provides a study group for all parents, including the Head-Start-only parents. Coffee and doughnuts add to the social aspect of learning. Two family literacy

parents acted as substitute aides so that the Head Start staff could attend the focus group. A policy of this program is that family literacy parents get three extra points toward the Head Start application. As waiting lists are not at all uncommon, this helps to co-enroll families.

Perhaps best of all, the five programs felt that their collaboration was so strong that they were seen as one big program, not two separate programs. As one family literacy coordinator said, "What works is understanding the Head Start ways. Knowing their standards, parent philosophy, and dedication to parents is the cornerstone. Parents are respected as a source of authority and influence."

Question 2 asked the participants to discuss how their partnership developed. The genesis of each partnership was different due, presumably, to the different types of grantees: Head Start, Inc. Intermediate Unit, School District, and Community College. In grant writing at one program, the family center saw family literacy as the missing piece, as it already provided childcare and transportation. In another, the director of Head Start is new, coming from business, not education. He met with the Even Start staff within his first month. An adult education (ABE-GED program) approached Head Start which already had a family literacy program, though not state funded. They decided to collaborate and a new position was developed that bridges the Head Start and adult family literacy programs. Another adult literacy program contacted a head Start program about collaborating, but withdrew. Head Start then put a proposal together to be the family literacy provider.

Question 3 dealt with the grant writing process. In most cases, Head Start provided ideas for the grant, though family literacy took the lead in preparation. The exception was the site where Head Start is the grantee.

In the fourth question, participants were asked to explain how the partners developed and sustained trust. All five shared that it existed from the start with mutual respect and shared philosophies about families. All concurred that open and honest communication is key. Three elaborated that having a director who is a strong community member is important. Three programs suggested that having staff that are from the local community is critical for trust.

Developing and Sustaining Trust	
Existed at start	5
Shared philosophies	5
Open communication	5
Director, community ties	3
Local staff	3

The fifth question dealt with working together for program and instructional planning and implementation and evaluation and assessment. All programs reported that they plan together. Several have joint staff meetings. Three partnerships send both Head Start and

family literacy representatives to advisory boards of common interest. Three who attended co-training used what they learned there in their curriculum development. A critical part that makes this work is the system in place with an understanding of roles and responsibilities. Programs clearly are accommodating. One is switching the early childhood assessment to Creative Curriculum, which Head Start uses. The two partners in another program routinely share assessment results for early childhood, as Head Start uses Batelle and family literacy uses LAP-R, to provide a more comprehensive view of each child.

Planning and Implementation	
Plan together	5
Both on Advisory Boards	3
Joint staffing meetings	3
Share assessment results	3
Share evaluations	3

Problems encountered were the base for question six. Three of the five programs mentioned facilities as the main problem. One cited off-centered finances, where timing and allotment are different and have caused cash-flow and cost allocation issues and morale problems among staff. One program mentioned that there were early communication problems but these have since been worked out. All said that while there may be problems, they find ways to work them out together. Addressing the problem as soon as it emerges helps.

The seventh question asked the partners to consider the "system" they had in place to make this partnership work. "They are part of us" and making sure that responsibilities were clear were key to the system. Two programs have formal agreements or dispute resolutions. One keeps and distributes meeting agendas and minutes. Joint staff meetings and case manager meetings also provide a procedural system. Sharing each partner's annual self-assessments and the Even Start local evaluation are two final procedures that contribute to the system of partnership.

The last question was about the "value added" of the partnering, why one plus one makes more than two. "This partnership has energized each program," captures the message from all programs.

Partnering provides for better services to families—a stronger support network Four of the five mentioned that they are seen as one by the community. By working together they know the families better, as families will share different parts with each partner.

- "We problem-solve together, working on what's best for the family."

The partnering allows for greater and increased consistency in programming. Knowing more about each other has helped enormously. Combining families leads to a larger social aspect.

- "When the families in both programs come together for family nights, there's more energy and fun."

With common goals and mission, there is a greater validation of education. The closeness of the partnership lends credibility to each partner.

- "We're more believable to parents as partners."

There is great value to shared training and resources (including lending libraries), to create greater awareness of each others' programs, find similarities, and not duplicate efforts or materials. Four programs mentioned sharing staff services.

- "Our services complement each other.

Importantly, the partnership is the in-kind and resource support required by many grants.

Advice was offered to programs that are working to strengthen their partnerships.

- It is critical for both partners to have the same philosophy, values, and goals
- Each should have the same commitment to families
- The two programs should come together as one. Developing a flow chart together of responsibilities is a good way to do this
- Find the links and talk about how they relate as in a Venn diagram (e.g. Head Start and PA Family Literacy Performance Standards.)
- Be located at the same site (this may be hard).
- Offer a "What is...Head Start?" and "What is... family literacy?" to staff
- Flexibility to adjust to daily issues.
- Seamless and consistent services
- Talk and work together. One exercise was to examine the four components and develop a lesson plan together integrating the components.
- Plan as a team. Long-term for the year and regularly for short-term units, projects, etc.

There were several positive unexpected outcomes of the focus group meetings. The participants at all of the sites commented on how it was rich and helpful to talk together during the focus groups. Thinking about and discussing the questions validated what they had already accomplished, made them think more deeply about issues they had encountered, and provided a focus for the future. In a letter, an Education and Family Literacy specialist from a Head Start Program captured what all of the groups articulated after their groups, "I think I can speak for all who attended the Family Literacy/Head Start focus group when I say it was a wonderful experience. The facilitators were wonderful, guiding us in bringing to light some of our proudest moments and success stories! All of us involved in the collaboration find it to be one of the highlights of our work, and I thank you and your staff for giving us the opportunity to spend this time together."

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